Plant and Share

Precious Pollinators

Bees are much loved and appreciated. They make wonderful products like honey and beeswax, feature in many films and have become the hero in the story of pollination. There are other vital pollinators and many of them don't get such a lovely welcome. Some are definitely seen as the bad guy. This resource debunks myths about the creepy crawlies that some people love to hate and shares ideas on how we can give a little love to all pollinators, not just the fluffy yellow and black striped ones!

Why is pollination so important?

Flowers need to be fertilised so they can make the seeds, fruit and nuts needed to grow seedlings and spread to new places.

Plants are clever. They attract insects with their sweet, delicious nectar and when the insect lands pollen rubs off onto their bodies. It is the pollen that is vital to the plant being recreated. As butterflies, wasps and moths move from flower to flower they rub pollen onto different plants which helps create seeds. This process is called entomophily.

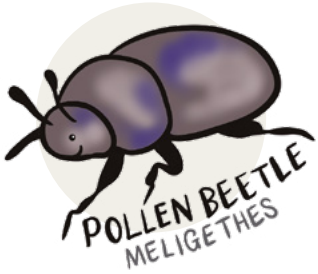
Pollination is important for the food we eat. Did you know that pollinators are part of the workforce who create the strawberries for jam, the cocoa for chocolate and things like apples and tomatoes as well as flowers?

You can read more about pollination in our other Bee and Pollinator resources.

Fun fact

Did you know that reptiles, birds and even mammals are pollinators?

Six underappreciated pollinators



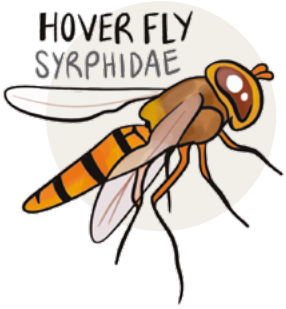
1. Beetles

Beetles have been on the planet a really long time, even as far back as dinosaurs! They are believed to be one of the first pollinators to evolve. Even the ladybird plays a small role in pollination. Their main diet is aphids, but they supplement that with a sweet nectar snack. There are over 400,000 species of beetle which makes them super-pollinators, especially in dry countries, around the world.

The aptly named pollen beetles (Meligethes) are seen as a pest by commercial farmers and some gardeners, as they can nibble developing flower heads on brassica crops like oilseed, rapeseed and cauliflower. In reality, they do little to no harm to small garden plots and flowers and any harm can be prevented by using a mesh over plants or by simply shaking them off. There are over 100 species of pollen beetle in the UK alone and they pollinate flowers like cow parsley. They like wide, flat flowers so they can crawl more easily.

2. Wasps

Wasps (Vespidae) are probably the least favourite of our pollinators, perhaps with some reason, but it isn't true to say they don't have a purpose. They are busy and energetic and therefore need lots of nectar. They aren't as fluffy and hairy as bees so whilst they aren't as effective at collecting pollen, they do play an important part. Did you know that wasps are responsible for pollinating most fig plants?



3. Flies

Flies, like house flies and fruit flies, may be a nuisance in our homes, but as a species flies have a role to play in pollination.

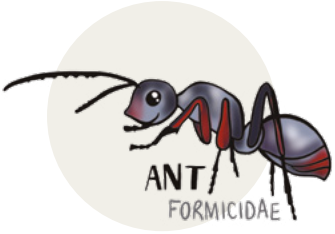
Varieties like the hoverfly (Syrphidae) are responsible for pollinating most of the cocoa around the world, so without flies we might not have chocolate. Did you know that there are 275 species of hoverfly alone? They can fly hundreds of miles a day and are responsible for pollinating over 70% of food crops around the world. They really are superheroes.

4. Moths

Moths, like the elephant hawk moth (Deilephila elpenor) do most of their pollinating at night, when we are tucked up in bed! They particularly like sweet smelling plants like jasmine and honeysuckle. They also visit plants not often visited by bees and butterflies, which is great for pollination. Research into discovering what moths do in the small hours is relatively new, but they are believed to fly great distances and pollinate commercial crops in the UK such as brassicas like cabbages, cauliflowers and oilseed, and hedgerow flowers like wild blackberries.

5. Butterflies

Dingy skipper butterflies (Erynnis tages) are just one of over 50 resident butterflies in the UK. Whilst moths pollinate scented flowers at night-time, butterflies pollinate them during the day. They use their really long tongues to reach to take the nectar into flowers like lavender. Whilst they may be generalist pollinators – not known for having a specific relationship with one plant – they are important to cross pollination in our hedgerows and fields. Three quarters of the species found in the UK are in decline.



6. Ants

Ants (Formicidae) aren't going to win an award for pollination! Mostly they accidentally collect pollen that has fallen to the ground due to wind or as they go about their business gathering leaves or searching for food sources like aphids. They aren't very hairy and they are also super clean insects, meaning they will often groom themselves before the pollen may have transferred. However, they do play a part, especially in dry harsh conditions where other pollinators wouldn't survive.

Hints and tips

1. **Grow insect friendly plants** – ask your garden centre or allotment for ideas of insect friendly plants. Try wildflowers, lavender and even apple trees.

2. **Turn the lights off** – whilst garden lights and lighting paths is important for safety of us humans it is important to remember light pollution can cause problems for moths, bats and other nocturnal creatures. Perhaps you can put lights on a timer.

3. **Build a bug hotel** – many insects hibernate and in busy cities and towns need somewhere to sleep away the winter. Try our bug hotel resource and build some nice comfy new homes for insects to check in to.

4. **Go wild** – let your grass grow and take part in #NoMowMay. Give over a window box or area behind a shed to a wildflower bed. At the end of the growing season leave things a little untidy, don't rush to scoop up leaves – all act as natural shade, hiding spaces and can help soak up rainwater.

5. **Eat organic or free range where you can** – simple swaps like spices, eggs and local seasonal veggies are a good place to start. If you pop to a local zero waste store, you'll often find organic herbs and spices at much more affordable prices.

Generate conversation and explore sensory experiences.

- Visit an allotment or farm with an apiary (where beehives are kept)
- Head outside to a park or garden and record the insects you see on flowers, be careful not to get in the way of their busy work. Did you see different insects on different shaped flowers? Are they all visiting certain colours of flowers? Are they attracted to the scented plants?
- Discuss the huge variety of foods that rely on pollinators, both here in the UK and around the world. Which of your favourite foods would you miss the most without the vital work of pollinators?

About this resource

Want to help more of our pollinators or learn how to identify different bee species then check out all our **Bee Kind resources**

foodforlife.org.uk/campaigns

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